THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

BENGALURU • FRIDAY • JANUARY 02, 2026 • ₹9.00 • PAGES 42 • LATE CITY EDITION

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1ST VANDE BHARAT SLEEPER TRAIN TO RUN BETWEEN GUWAHATI AND KOLKATA

India's first Vande Bharat sleeper train, equipped with world-class amenities, will run between the capitals of poll-bound Assam and West Bengal

MODI TO FLAG OFF SERVICE LATER THIS MONTH

The services are expected to become operational in the next 15-20 days, possibly around January 18 or 19, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said. "We have requested the prime minister (to flag off the service). I will announce the exact date in the next two to three days," the minister said, adding that the final date is being worked out with the PMO

FARE STARTS AT ₹2,300 FOR 3RD AC COACH

- The 16-coach train, with a passenger capacity of 823, has a design speed of 180 km per hour. However, it will operate at a speed of 120-130 kmph, covering the distance between the two cities overnight
- The 3rd-AC fare will be around ₹2,300, 2nd-AC ₹3,000, and 1st-AC around ₹3,600, which will include food, Vaishnaw said | **P12**

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VANDE BHARAT SLEEPER TRAINS ARE EXPECTED TO BE PUT INTO SERVICE IN 2026

CHENNAI ▪ MADURAI ▪ VIJAYAWADA ▪ BENGALURU ▪ KOCHI ▪ HYDERABAD ▪ VISAKHAPATNAM ▪ COIMBATORE ▪ KOZHIKODE ▪ THIRUVANANTHAPURAM ▪ BELAGAVI ▪ BHUBANESWAR ▪ SHIVAMOGGA ▪ MANGALURU ▪ TIRUPATI ▪ TIRUCHY ▪ TIRUNELVELI ▪ SAMBALPUR ▪ HUBBALLI ▪ DHARMAPURI ▪ KOTTAYAM ▪ KANNUR ▪ VILLUPURAM ▪ KOLLAM ▪ TADEPALLIGUDEM ▪ NAGAPATTINAM ▪ THRISSUR ▪ KALABURAGI

Crucial Manipur meeting today

Could draw roadmap for political transition

MUKESH RANJAN @ New Delhi

UNION home minister Amit Shah will chair a high-level review meeting on Manipur on January 2, as the state prepares for a possible political transition ahead of the scheduled end of Central rule on February 13.

The meeting assumes significance as Manipur has seen relative calm after nearly two-and-a-half years of ethnic violence, raising expectations that the Centre may soon move towards facilitating a political solution and restoring elected government.

Sources said the review will focus on assessing ground-level conditions and determining the roadmap for the coming weeks. The meeting will be attended by Manipur Governor Ajay Kumar Bhalla, state government adviser Kuldiep Singh, Chief Secretary P K Goel and Director General of Police Rajiv Singh, along with senior officials of the Union Ministry of Home Affairs. All key state officials have already arrived in New Delhi for the deliberations.

"The home minister will review recent developments on the ground, assess the prevailing security environment and evaluate coordinated deployment of forces. Discussions are also likely on development initiatives aimed at rebuilding infrastructure and restoring normalcy in affected areas," a source said.

President's rule was imposed in Manipur following the resignation of the then chief minister N Biren Singh amid sustained ethnic violence. Ever since, the state has been administered by the Governor.

Political parties have already begun informal consultations on the possibility of government formation. The outcome of the January 2 meeting will set the tone for the next phase, including decisions on whether to move towards an elected government or continue with administrative arrangements under Central oversight.

AT LEAST 47 DEAD IN SWISS BAR FIRE

Videograb of the fire at Le Constellation bar in the luxury ski resort town of Crans-Montana in Switzerland. Inset: Police officers and rescuers at the site | AFP

AGENCIES

AT least 47 people were killed and 115 others seriously injured after a massive fire ripped through a crowded bar in the upscale Swiss ski resort town of Crans-Montana during a New Year's party, reports said on Thursday.

The fire broke out at 1.30 am local time in a luxury bar called Le Constellation in the resort in southwestern Switzerland, which locals said was popular with teenagers.

The cause of the blaze, which was initially reported as an explosion, remains unclear but authorities said it appeared to be an accident rather than an attack.

Reports said there were around 200 people, mostly youngsters, in the basement venue at the time. The fire intensified into a flashover, when extreme heat caused everything inside the enclosed space to ignite all at once, leaving people little chance to escape. Many perished in the crush to get up the single staircase to the exit, *The Daily Mail* reported.

Valais Canton police commander Frédéric Gisler said work was underway to identify the victims, who may include foreign nationals as Crans-Montana is an international ski and golf venue.

Axel Clavier, a 16-year-old from Paris who survived the blaze, described "total chaos" inside the bar. One of his friends died and "two or three were missing," he told *The Associated Press*. He said he saw waitresses arrive with Champagne bottles with sparklers.

Two women told French broadcaster *BFMTV* that they were inside when they saw a male bartender lifting a female bartender on his shoulders as she held a lit candle in a bottle. The flames spread, collapsing the wooden ceiling, they told the broadcaster.

Officials said the blaze likely triggered the release of combustible gases that ignited violently.

Swiss President Guy Parmelin said that the government's 'thoughts go to the victims, to the injured and their relatives, to whom it addresses its sincere condolences'.

Govt defers handing over houses to Kogilu evictees

MOHAMMED YACOOB @Bengaluru

With the opposition BJP raising a hue and cry, the state government on Thursday deferred allotment of homes to the slum-dwellers who were evicted from Kogilu in Yelahanka for a day.

Housing Minister BZ Zameer Ahmed Khan said the allotment would be held on Friday after verification of documents of the beneficiaries.

The minister said the GBA and Rajiv Gandhi Housing Corporation would review the documents and provide housing only to the eligible ones at the Karnataka Housing Board quarters in Byappanahalli.

The government has come under fire, first, for razing homes without following due rehabilitation process and, then, for its decision to allot homes to the slum-dwellers.

The BJP alleged that that the government is allotting homes to illegal Bangladeshi Muslims and migrants from other states, including West Bengal, to appease minority community. The party also alleged that the Congress government was succumbing to pressure from Kerala. **CONTINUED ON: P4**

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EXPRESS READ

Lingayats to hold day of penance today

Bengaluru: In an unprecedented act, the Lingayat community will observe day-long penance on Friday to condemn the brutal 'honour' killing of a woman for marrying outside her caste | **P4**

MLA's gunman fires during clash, man dies

Ballari: A BJP worker died in a clash between supporters of BJP MLA Janardhan Reddy and Cong MLA Bharath Reddy. The latter's gunman fired after the groups began throwing stones, hitting Rajashekar | **P6**

Expect warmer winter, lesser rainfall this year

JITENDRA CHOUBEY @ New Delhi

THIS winter from January to March would be warmer in most parts of the country, resulting in less rainfall and fewer cold waves, the India Meteorological Department has predicted.

The weatherman expects below normal rainfall over Northwest, Northeast, and Peninsular India in winter. It could lead to higher temperatures in most parts of India.

The reduced rainfall and early temperature rise could impact the flowering of the wheat crops, which are predominantly grown in the Northwest.

Regarding the monthly forecast, the IMD indicated that nights will be colder while days will be relatively warm, with normal rainfall expected in January. Additionally, a higher number of cold wave days are expected in some areas of Central India, eastern Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar this month.

As for the year that just went by, 2025 was the eighth warmest year in the last 125 years of IMD's recorded history, while the Northwest region experienced its fourth warmest December during the same period. Besides, December 2025 was among the driest winter months, with Central India recording the lowest rainfall ever in the history of the IMD.

The warmest year on record was 2024, when mean temperature across India was 0.65°C above the long-term average (see table).

FIVE WARMEST YEARS ON RECORD

Year	Warmer by
2024	+0.65°C
2016	+0.54°C
2009	+0.40°C
2010	+0.39°C
2017	+0.38°C

In 2025, heavy rainfall and subsequent flooding led to the deaths of over 1,370 individuals, while heatwaves accounted for more than 35 fatalities across different regions. Thunderstorms and lightning were responsible for over 1,310 more deaths.

India also faced four cyclonic storms during the post-monsoon season in the North Indian Ocean: Shakti, Montha, Senyar and Ditwah. While Montha, Senyar and Ditwah were formed over the Bay of Bengal, the Shakti system originated over the Arabian Sea.

The year 2025 was also the 12th time no cyclones formed between January and September since 1891.

LITERARY AWARDS

All set for RNG Sahithya Samman today

PARAMITA GHOSH @ New Delhi

THE Ramnath Goenka Sahithya Samman (RNGSS) 2025 is homebound. In the 1930s, Ramnath Goenka, a doyen of the Indian print industry and the visionary behind *The New Indian Express* (*TNIE*) Group, conceived the idea of a newspaper in Chennai that would be synonymous with fearless journalism. He also seeded the idea of an award for timeless literature, and for giving a platform to young writers who were thinking outside the grid, building new worlds with the power of imagination, with new ideas, styles, narratives and courage.

Announced at the Odisha Literary Festival 2023, and after a strong launch in Delhi in 2024, the RNGSS heads to Chennai, the *TNIE* group's headquarters. Four awards—for Lifetime Achievement, Best Fiction, Best Non-Fiction and Best Debut – will be given at a prestigious ceremony in Chennai on Friday. Vice President of India, C P Radhakrishnan, will grace the occasion as Chief Guest, at a function to be attended by the city's intelligentsia and who's who.

This year, Manoj Kumar Sonthalia, Chairman and Managing Director of *TNIE* Group, proposed combining Debut Fiction and Non-Fiction into a single Debut category, while maintaining separate Fiction and Non-Fiction categories for more established writers.

For the third edition of RNGSS, the *TNIE* team began curating the longlist in July. Submissions poured in from senior editors across *TNIE* centres in New Delhi, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Odisha. Publishers also sent in their recommendations. Books released between July 2024 and June 2025 were considered for nomination.

The winners were shortlisted at a meeting in Delhi in October, attended by the internal and external jury. Each book was closely studied, discussed and fought for to arrive at the winners.

The jury was chaired by author and former diplomat Pavan Varma; author Githa Hariharan and economist Sanjeev Sanyal were the other external jury members.

From books on lesser-known public figures such as Irawati Karve, the Partition, the story of everywoman who struggles to find a foothold in the city to a study of rage and true crime—the mix this year showed Indian authors writing about India, the neighbourhood, the borderlands, and the urban sprawl with young and wise eyes, critical and social conscience, and a mature handling of their material. To us, all these books are winners.

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